Year Zero, simply ignored their artistic birthright. They locked the doors but failed to destroy it—as they set out to destroy anyone who might have an understanding of it, and anyone who might be able to organise its conservation.

This is where the Australian National Gallery came in. Eighteen months ago, Asian curator Michael Brand set out through South East Asia to make institutional links. In Phnom Penh he met Pich Keo, now director of the National Museum—the sole survivor from French days, saved because his archeology-roughened hands were mistaken for those of a peasant. Brand realised that exchanges of art were of far less use to the Cambodians than a swap of their art for Australian skills and training facilities. This became political when Gareth Evans took the deal to Prime Minister Hun Sen and also won the enthusiastic backing of Prince Norodom Sihanouk. Agreement was signed last December. Amazingly, no money has changed hands for an exhibition insured for US$35 million, and few details have been worked out yet for Australia's contributions in kind.

At this stage cultural politics entered the arena. The Japanese had plans for an exhibition in 1993, but the Cambodians wanted Australia honoured first. Then the French, British and Americans wanted to take the Australian exhibition on to their countries. But the sheer logistics of choosing pieces strong enough to travel (two were left behind at the last moment because of uncertainty), constructing individual packing cases for each piece (which the Cambodians will keep), and involving the RAAF (the only organisation used to Phnom Penh airport with planes big enough and its own lifting equipment) all combined to make onward travel impossible. And, as Michael Brand insists, decisions like that ought to wait until the Cambodians know enough about the conservation of their own art to come to their own conclusions.

With all this political football in the background, at the exhibition's opening Paul Keating spoke intensely of the "power of culture to unite people and heal differences". A message from Prince Sihanouk spoke of "once again achieving the greatness of the Angkor Period in Cambodia". An older Gareth Evans than the one who backed packed around Cambodia in the 60s looked on benevolently. But perhaps the happiest person there was Sylvie Kea Chin, a young woman who has spent more than 20 years in Australia, but who felt that now she was reuniting herself with her real culture. "My people lost their souls under the Khmer Rouge, but we always had postcards, photos and wall-hangings at home of these artworks, which kept our culture alive. To see something like the Vishnu statue here in Canberra makes me feel so strong, knowing this was made by my people so long ago". Anyone intending to be anywhere near Canberra before 25 October should go to see what she means.

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Identity Crisis


Take the (not entirely hypothetical) example of a women's health centre. You might expect a congenial and committed working place, but instead you find the place seething with acrimony: each woman is proclaiming that she has been more oppressed than the others by reason of a) her class background, b) her cultural background, c) her sexuality and d) her disabilities. There is, in short, a peculiar competition in play whereby each woman is attempting to be top of the pecking order—is somehow "purer"—by dint of the number of points of oppression she can lay claim to. The scene is reminiscent of Werner Hertzog's terrifying film, Even Dwarves Started Small. Forgotten in this power struggle are the two points that connect these workers: the common ground of being women and of working for the health of other women.

If such a scenario is possible in a working environment where you might expect a sense of professionalism, of discipline, to prevail, then how is cooperation, let alone harmony, to be found in voluntary associations, community organisations and ordinary social relations between individuals? You may think this is the stuff of science fiction, but such are the concerns of those who speculate on the politics of identity. Associated with this politics of identity is what Jan Pettman calls the politics of boundary making which, in turn, makes use of Foucault's nexus between power and knowledge, a notion not so far removed from the older Gramscian notion of hegemony.

According to this view, dominant discourses in effect put boundaries around social groups like women, Aborigines and migrants that serve to oppress such groups and to denote those who are to be included in the subordinate groupings or excluded from the dominant group. Such boundaries are imagined, but are at the same time real. In the case of women, Aborigines and migrants, the boundaries once had to do with supposed
biological characteristics; through mounting criticism and subsequent change in official policy, they have shifted, but certainly not disappeared.

The late Jean Martin, in the Migrant Presence, charted the early connections between changes in “public knowledge” and subsequent changes in official policy towards migrants, and this work has been carried on, in altered forms, by feminist writers like Jan Pettman in her Living in the Margins and the contributors to Intersexions. In these recent works—and particularly in Pettman’s—there are suggestions that with the new policies of equal opportunity, affirmative action and multiculturalism, formerly oppressed groups come to have a vested interest in keeping the boundaries firmly in place, since they can make political mileage, gain extra concessions, from their new-found identities.

The difficulty I have with such a politics of identity has to do with the nature of those identities. We are all more than our language, our gender, our sexuality, aren’t we? We can all step in and out of roles as the situation demands, can’t we? Why do we therefore insist on wearing these gleaming badges of oppression? Why do we want to flaunt these oppressed identities? While the recognition of an oppression is the start of the end of that particular oppression, it is still a long way from liberation. (What a splendidly old-fashioned ring that word has!) People wear their oppression, live their oppression, forgetting that the behaviour is the behaviour of the oppressed, rather than that of a ‘free’ individual. Thus, women, for instance, assert that behaviour like tears, temper tantrums and emotional blackmail is natural, just part and parcel of an essential femaleness. Nonsense: these are the old ploys, the old responses to oppression. A new behaviour awaits discovery. And the preoccupation with identity does not rest with the self; it extends to the classification of others, usually informed by visual or verbal cues. This, of course, is the old bohey of stereotyping at work again—this time in the hands of its erstwhile victims.

Although feminism and multiculturalism are ‘isms’ of differing orders, both are capable of generating the politics of identity. Multiculturalism, in its best light, represents a fair go for all; in this light it remains an official policy, but one borne out of humanism and a desire for equality. On another construction it is the means for ameliorating social tensions, or, as some writers insist, for diffusing class struggle. It is a doctrine that has been handed down from on high and eagerly grasped by those whose cultural background is not Anglo-Australian. And it has been used by them to institute power struggles within their own particular cultural setting, to set up hierarchies of cultural truths and to produce ‘legitimate’ spokespersons. The resultant voices are usually male, as Jan Pettman reminds us.

In its worst light, multiculturalism represents a new, softer racism, one that erects ‘cultural’ distinctions where biological distinctions once stood. The problem for multiculturalism is that it rests on a static version of traditional culture. But culture is very fluid and is transformed whenever meaningful exchanges with other cultural elements occur. Indeed, as Claude Levi Strauss was fond of observing, a culture doesn’t know it is a culture until it bumps into another culture. It is the contact that allows recognition, even self-consciousness. Another problem for multiculturalism is that it rests on tolerance, thus guaranteeing unequal power relations, since (as writers like Ghassan Hage note) the tolerators can always withdraw their tolerance from the tolerated and those tolerated must ensure that they do nothing to offend the tolerators. In all of this the bigger bohey of institutional racism goes untouched, unchallenged.

Feminism, on the other hand, has been created by women for women, and has occasionally informed official policy. Women have articulated its philosophies. Feminist theory at its very best is a powerful tool for transforming women’s lives and for challenging patriarchy. Because it is so powerful, so sensible, so usable we tend to think its message is universal. We forget that feminisms have been constructed to reflect certain realities in the lives of western women. We do not like to think of feminism as a weapon that can be used to proselytise women from non-western societies, women who do not share our particular experience or view of the world. The words of Grace Mera Molisa from Vanuatu, quoted in Intersexions, are a forceful reminder:

Women’s Liberation...is a European disease to be cured by Europeans. What we are aiming for is not just women’s liberation but a total liberation. A social, political and economic liberation...European women thought up Women’s Liberation because they didn’t have enough to do, and they were bored out of their minds. They were sick of being ornaments in the house. They hate their men for it. That’s not our position at all.

Of course, we will challenge the truth of such statements from our own culture and experience, but views like these are important reminders that feminism can be another dominant western ideology which, like Christianity and capitalism, we foist upon non-western societies. And of course, we can say of women like Molisa that they have yet to recognise the ways they are oppressed by their men, and that once they perceive their false consciousness, they can be ‘saved’ by feminism.

Both multiculturalism and feminism can help institutionalise an atomistic and alienated society—one based on the wounded individuals found in the hypothetical health centre—or they can be used to connect these individuals through their various oppressions. The intricacies of the politics of identity and of boundary making are superbly untangled in Pettman’s book, while Intersexions begins to plot some of the ways that the paths of the oppressed might cross. In the end we can all choose to remain victims or to struggle together for a fairer society. If we allow the politics of identity to predominate, then the wish of the Indigo Girls will come true:

How I wish I were a trinity
So if I lost a part of me
I'd still have two of the same...

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